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How the U.S. Should Handle Nicaragua

By Edgar Chamorro

KEY BISCAIYNE, Fla. — Once again, United States policy toward Nicaragua has failed at a critical juncture. Congress recently voted \$27 million in "humanitarian aid" to the "contras" fighting the Sandinista regime. This will not end the conflict; it will only make matters worse.

Rather than engage itself further, economically or militarily, the best course for the United States is to distance itself from the conflict, encourage political dialogue and support Latin American countries in their effort to prevent a regional war.

My experience as a former rebel leader convinced me that the Nicaraguan Democratic Force cannot contribute to the democratization of Nicaragua. The rebels are in the hands of former national guardsmen who control the contra army, stifle internal dissent and intimidate or murder those who dare oppose them. The rebels have been subject to manipulation by the Central Intelligence Agency, which has reduced it to a front organization.

For example, in January 1984 after the C.I.A. mined Nicaragua's harbors, I was awakened at my "safe house" in Tegucigalpa at 2 A.M. by an anxious C.I.A. agent. He handed me a press release written in perfect Spanish by C.I.A. officials. I was surprised to read its claim that the Democratic Force had laid these mines. I was instructed to read this announcement on our clandestine radio station before the Sandinistas broke the news.

Of course, we had no role in mining the harbors. Ironically, two months later, when a Soviet ship struck a mine, the same agent appeared. Out of fear of creating an international incident, he ordered us to deny that one of "our" mines had done the damage.

Nonetheless, President Reagan has persuaded Congress to aid the contras. The message Congress sends is that a political solution is not possible and that the Sandinistas will respond only to military pressure.

But the legislators who voted for

the aid are mistaken; there is still time for a political resolution, but not much. These steps should be taken:

- A political dialogue should be the first priority. Past proposals for dialogue have been delivered as ultimatums and were therefore unacceptable. The first step toward national reconciliation and dialogue must be abolition of the contra army.

By urging the rebels to lay down their guns, the United States could support a policy of national reconciliation that would strengthen the moderates and pragmatists and weaken the extremists and ideologues on both sides. Moderate political leaders should not be encouraged to leave Nicaragua to join the "freedom-fighters." It is the moderates who are most capable of engaging in dialogue.

What's more, applying military pressure inflicts suffering and pain on the people of Nicaragua, leads to further political polarization and increases the danger of military escalation. The present policy of applying pressure to the Sandinistas until they "cry uncle" grossly underestimates Nicaraguan pride and self-esteem. A revolution based on national pride and dignity will never "cry uncle."

- The Reagan Administration should give more than lip service to the Contadora initiative — sponsored by Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela and Panama — which still presents the best option for achieving a lasting political solution. Nicaragua is a Latin American problem best solved by Latin American leaders.

The funds voted by Congress are simply another vehicle to prolong this war. The only assistance worthy of the name "humanitarian aid" is help for victims on both sides.

What we must do is to recognize the

good that has come from the revolution in Nicaragua. It has brought a sense of dignity and independence to the Nicaraguan people. The Sandinistas' concern for the poor cannot be faulted. Likewise, there are some democratic leaders associated with the contras. The challenge is to bring

together the good on both sides with minimal foreign interference.

Nicaraguans must find their own solution. We are the ones who ultimately must live together. But the Sandinistas will not talk to the contras as long as they are perceived as Mr. Reagan's army.

Finding a solution to the conflict in Nicaragua requires patience in spite of the apparent urgency; wisdom in the midst of complexity; tolerance and magnanimity in accepting the stumbling steps of a young nation finding its own way. Such qualities are the privilege of a great power and the most important contribution that the United States can make toward resolving the crisis in Nicaragua. □

Edgar Chamorro broke with the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, one of the "contra" groups, last November.